

Field Notes Fall 2004

Fall in the Forest—wind towers, grasshopper labs, and white-tail deer.

Another fall has come and gone in the Hopkins Forest and with it the usual flurry of activity that accompanies the cooling of the air, shortening of the days and falling of the leaves—Fall Festival, Ecology field trips, visiting school groups, saw-whet owl banding and deer hunting.

In addition, this Autumn saw the installation of a 50-meter anemometer tower atop the Taconic Range on the western edge of the forest. This tower—enabled in large part by the work of Nicolas Hiza, David Dethier and some funding from CES and Buildings and Grounds--will measure the wind speed at various heights for a two year period. Our intention is to use this information to model wind dynamics and assess the potential for wind power on the nearby mountains. So next time you are out walking in Williamstown set your sight on the high ridge to the west and see if you can locate a long needle-like structure rising from it.

The newly erected MET tower.



During the planning of the wind tower installation, HMF hosted a symposium on regional wind power for a group of fellows from the MIT Laboratory for Energy and the Environment. The program was facilitated by David Dethier, Nancy Nysten (Center for Ecological Technology), and Nicholas Hiza. Fellows learned about the geo-physical, political and logistical issues to be considered in planning wind farms, and were led on a hike to see potential sites on the Taconic Range.

In another development, the Forest expanded by an additional 73 acres with the purchase of a section of the Wire Bridge Farm in August. This distinctive property, tucked between the Hoosic River and Northwest Hill, increases the variety of habitats and potential research and demonstration sites within HMF. In addition to a wooded hillside, the property includes a thermal spring, calcareous fen, open fields and a strip of river-front forest. Students and faculty have already been begun collecting and analyzing water samples from the spring,

and members of the Spring 2005 Environmental Planning class will be engaged in developing a land-use strategy for this parcel.

As any resident of northwest Williamstown knows, late fall is hunting season in Massachusetts. This year hunters harvested eight white-tail deer during HMF's two week special permit hunt. This hunt has been held annually for the past 30 years; during this period the deer harvest has declined somewhat as the forest has matured and hunting pressure has eased. With the extirpation of the white-tail's natural predators (mountain lion and gray wolf) more than 100 years ago, humans have become the major player in regulating deer populations, primarily through hunting. A spring walk through the Hopkins Forest, with its relatively lush understory and healthy populations of ground and shrub nesting birds, attests to the ecological value of keeping the deer herd under control as we have tried to do over the years. Moreover, reasonable population levels tend to reduce competition among individuals and foster healthier populations; the good size of the deer taken from the Forest this year suggests that this is the case in the tri-state area.



The Wire Bridge Farm

As winter arrives, and senescence is complete, the forest prepares to assume its role as a winter laboratory as well as playground for cross-country skiers. This January John McCarter will offer a winter study course on animal tracking that will make considerable use of the forest. Students will have the opportunity to follow the trails of many of the forest's year-round residents, including white-footed mice, meadow voles, gray and red squirrels, rabbits, deer, fishers, bobcats, ruffed grouse, and coyotes—testimony to the fact that, in spite of appearances, life in the winter forest never ceases.

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